

*Walla Walla's Nathan Castoldi*

# A Young Grower Intent on Carrying on a Family Tradition



At age 25, Nathan Castoldi is much younger than the typical Walla Walla Sweet onion grower. The local association places the average age at 55. In fact, a number of his older neighbors are watching out of the corner of their eyes to see if the young, college-educated grower will continue to farm or will give it up and opt out like many of his peers.

As they approach retirement, most of these farming families have no children interested in continuing to farm. That leaves them with few options — either sell out to a neighbor hoping to increase the size of his operation or accept an offer for bigger bucks from a housing developer. The latter route has become too enticing for many to ignore.

Nathan Castoldi has degrees from both Walla Walla Community College and the University of Idaho and could consider other options. He earned an associate degree in agricultural science in 2001 and a bachelor's degree in agricultural systems management in 2005.

Immediately after graduation, he came back to farm with his father, Bob Castoldi, and uncle, Paul, in a family-run operation that dates back to 1926. It was then that his great grandfather, Andrea Castoldi, settled in the Walla Walla area and began growing onions, spinach and carrots. Later, he would pass the family business on to his son, Angelo Castoldi, Nathan's grandfather, who, in turn, passed it on to Bob and Paul. Nathan now farms in a partnership arrangement with his father and uncle.

## Loves Growing Onions

"I can't imagine doing anything else," Nathan grins. "There was never any question in my mind that I would be returning here to farm. This is what the Castoldi family has always done, and I want to do my best to carry on our family tradition. I'm doing something that my great grandfather, grandfather and dad all did for a living, and I am excited about continuing on."

As most Walla Walla onion operations, Castoldi Farms is relatively small. The three partners have 44 acres of onions in production this year, most Walla Walla Sweets. There also are 13 acres of red varieties, two acres of salad onions (hand peeled, immature Walla Walla Sweets sold

in bunches of threes) and a few acres of spring-seeded winter onions. The family also has 60 acres in wheat and another acre or so in various vegetable crops – lettuce, broccoli, radishes, etc. – sold fresh to local market outlets.

According to Kathy Fry, director of marketing for the Walla Walla Sweet Onion Marketing Committee, there are around 25 families growing Walla Walla Sweets today. Combined acreage is around 750. Both family numbers and acreage have been in steady decline. At one time, many more families were involved and there were more than 1,500 acres of Walla Walla Sweets grown in the area.

Why the decline? There are lots of reasons, Fry notes. Hard pressed to make a good living, many families have been unable to keep their sons and daughters enthused, economically, about the future of the business. Too many alternative careers out there promise greater financial rewards. Added to that is the spiraling cost of fuel, chemicals and land in general, making it difficult to compete.

“Only 10 acres of our ground is actually owned ground,” Nathan says. “The balance is leased. Gratefully, most local landowners have been cooperative and have been willing to negotiate a reasonable contract. They just want enough to cover their taxes and expenses and recognize that while there have been a few good years in the industry, there also are lots of down years when we have had to scratch to get by.”

Compounding the challenge for local onion growers is urban sprawl, which has taken its toll on some of the best onion ground. Much of this is associated with growth in the local wine industry; those coming in from outside, such as Seattle where property values are high, have built many expensive and beautiful homes at a fraction of the cost. This is driving up local land prices and is making it difficult for local growers to compete.

“We used to be able to purchase ground for \$3,000 per acre, but now that same land is being sold at \$30,000 per acre or more,” Fry notes.

One piece of property “just down the street” went for \$130,000 an acre, Nathan points out. A lot of land has been sold in the \$50,000-\$60,000-per-acre range.

## Onion Celebration

Despite the challenges, Nathan makes no secret that he is in the onion business to stay. He will be joining with other neighbors July 19 and 20 to celebrate the Walla Walla Sweet Onion Festival. The two-day event will take place downtown in the Main Street and Farmers’ Market area.

While overall acreage is small, the Walla Walla Sweet has made a name for itself and is in high demand in many areas of the country. On April 20, 2007, the Washington State Legislature declared the

onions become too large, they are left in the field to mature a bit more and be harvested with the regular Walla Walla Sweet Onion crop.

The harvesting season for Walla Walla Sweets begins in June and is pretty well wrapped up by the end of July. The red onion harvest commences around the fourth of July. The spring-seeded sweets are harvested and sold through the end of August, followed by Candy, their winter variety for the late season.



Paul Castoldi, left, and Nathan Castoldi preparing salad onions for market.

Walla Walla Sweet Onion as the state’s official vegetable. Each year, many long-term customers, both near and far away, are anxious for a taste of this seasonal favorite.

“Right now (early June), we’re finishing up our salad onion season,” Nathan points out. “These are immature Walla Walla Sweets with the necks on, still firm and reasonably small. We peel off a layer of skin, wash them and then sell most of them through Walla Walla Gardeners Association in bunches of three. We also deliver some of them directly to restaurants and a couple of produce businesses.”

The salad onions are grown separately from those specifically earmarked for the Walla Walla Sweet Onion market. The harvest begins in early May and continues through the first part of June. As the salad onion season approaches an end and the

## White Rot Challenge

One of the major production challenges, Nathan acknowledges, is dealing with white rot. Because the family is limited on available land space and grows back-to-back onions each year, white rot is an ongoing threat. After the onions are harvested in the fall, all fields are routinely fumigated with Vapam.

“Treating the ground each year is a must,” Nathan says. “Generally speaking, Vapam will get rid of 98 percent of anything there, but once in a while there is a skip and white rot will show up. We have a couple of acres of onions this year that were hit pretty hard. Our winter season didn’t help. It was cooler and wetter, and both conditions seem to promote fungal growth.”

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“We try to get everything out of the ground in June and July and then treat the ground in August,” he explains. “Following that, usually in early September, we begin our seeding for the next year.”

Castoldi Farms’ onions are all irrigated with hand lines. Nathan, his dad and uncle all take part in the daily routine of moving pipe.

Their onions are planted in 64-inch wide beds, 12 rows per bed. The sweets are grown from seed grown right there on the farm. At harvest time, the growers go through their fields, select the best onions for seeding, and then grow them out. Other than Candy and the red hybrids, all seed used is home grown.

Not yet married, Nathan spends a lot of his spare time refurbishing and racing stockcars. Races are held three times per year at the Walla Wall Fairgrounds. Other races take place in nearby Dayton and the Tri-Cities. 🍅